

Hume's Perceptions and the Burden of Representation

Throughout *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume seems to suggest that some perceptions of the mind have the capability to represent, but he is not completely explicit regarding *which* perceptions are capable of representing. His account of impressions and ideas leaves some room to speculate about which perceptions can represent, and which possess intentional content: ideas are considered to represent, but are not intrinsically representative, and impressions may represent, but passions cannot.¹ Because Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas is by and large considered a strictly phenomenal one, the question of which perceptions can represent is frustratingly convoluted. In this paper, I will focus on impressions and argue that none of Hume's impressions are capable of representing, due to the primacy of impressions and the gap between experience and reflection. Furthermore, I will argue that my position does not contradict Hume's position that the only difference between types of perceptions is rooted in their force or vivacity. In order to do so, I begin by giving a short account of impressions and ideas, explaining the differences in types of impressions. I will argue that Hume's account of idea formation and the passions renders it impossible for impressions to represent, and that representation belongs strictly in the domain of ideas. Once I have made my argument, I will defend it from the objection that ideas can and do represent, and since ideas and impressions are only distinguished by their force and vivacity, impressions also represent. Furthermore, I will defend my position against an argument that Don Garrett makes in his paper "Hume's Naturalistic Theory of Representation." Garrett suggests that moral and aesthetic

¹ For the purposes of this paper, 'represent' means to stand for or symbolize, and 'intentional content' refers to the contents of the perception that are *about* or *directed at* the subject being represented.

sentiments, species of secondary impressions, can represent in the same manner as impressions of color.

I will begin by giving Hume's account of perceptions. Hume declares that "all the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds" which he labels *impressions* and *ideas* (T 1.1.1.1).² Impressions are "all our sensations, passion and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul," and ideas are the "faint images" of impressions present in thinking and reasoning (T 1.1.1.1). He repeatedly asserts that impressions are always antecedent to ideas that ideas are copies of impressions, and that these ideas represent that which they are derived from (T1.1.1.12). Furthermore, Hume claims that the only difference between impressions and ideas lies in the "degrees of force and liveliness" with which they appear to the mind (T1.1.1.1). He posits that impressions and ideas can either be simple or complex. Simple perceptions are those that "admit of no distinction or separation" and complex perceptions can be broken down into parts (T 1.1.1.2).

Hume further divides impressions into original and secondary, also known as impressions of sensation and reflection, respectively.³ Hume does not give a detailed account of impressions of sensation, as he asserts that "the examination of our sensations belongs more to anatomists" (T1.1.2.1). He instead gives a thorough account of secondary impressions. Hume defines original and secondary impressions in the following passage:

Original impressions or impressions of sensation are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul, from the constitution of the body, from the animal spirits, or from the application of objects to

² References to "T" are of (Hume 2000) with the book, part, section, and paragraph numbers.

³ Hume initially distinguishes impressions into impressions of sensation and reflection in 1.1.2, but later in 2.1.1 he resolves this distinction into original and secondary.

the external organs. Secondary, or reflective impressions are such as proceed from some of these original ones, either immediately or by the interposition of its idea. Of the first kind are all the impressions of the senses, and all bodily pains and pleasures: Of the second are the passions, and other emotions resembling them (T 2.1.1.1).

What Hume means here is that original impressions are not reliant upon preceding impressions or ideas; they are foundational in this sense. Secondary impressions, by contrast, arise from ideas or original impressions, and are dependent upon them. It seems appropriate for Hume to refer to some secondary impressions as “reflective” because there is always some *post*-reflective or *extra*-experiential component involved in their creation.⁴ Original impressions are pre-reflective and experientially radical.

Hume begins his treatment of the passions by dividing them into *direct* and *indirect*. He defines the direct passions as those arising “immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure.” Hume asserts that the indirect passions derive from the same principles as the direct, but with “the conjunction of other qualities” (T 2.1.2.4). Hume gives a thorough account of the indirect passions, but is very brief with the direct passions, citing that “none of the direct affections seem to merit our particular attention, except hope and fear” (T 2.3.9.9).

Hume considers desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair and security to be direct passions. The indirect passions include pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice and generosity. It is important to note that Hume explicitly states that the passions do not represent; he asserts that “a passion is an original existence...and contains not any representative quality” (T 2.3.3.5). Here I will focus on the more thorough account of the indirect passions to explicate how they acquire intentional content.

⁴ Not all secondary impressions are impressions of reflection; some secondary impressions arise from other original impressions, independent from the consideration of ideas.

Hume explains his account of the indirect passions by using the familiar notions of pride and humility. He asserts that pride and humility have the same object: the self. Hume stresses that the object and the cause of these passions cannot be the same, so he seeks to distinguish between the two. He states that one idea will produce a passion, and that the passion “turns our view to another idea” (T 2.1.2.4). The first idea is the cause of the passion, and the second is the object of the passion. Regarding the cause of a passion, Hume makes a distinction between the quality, which stimulates the passion, and the subject in which the quality occurs. Furthermore, he posits that the subject must be in some sort of relation to us, otherwise the quality would not stimulate the passion. To illustrate this in the case of pride, Hume gives us an example of a beautiful house. If I am proud of my beautiful house, the cause of my pride is the beautiful house. The quality of the cause in this case is beauty, and the subject is my house (a house that is related to me via possession). I am the object in this example. There is nothing in the passion itself that represents. The idea of “my beautiful house” may cause the passion of pride, but the intentional content belongs to the idea itself. My pride is directed at me, making it an intentional state, but the pride itself does not possess intentional content. The pride does not represent the beauty, the house, or any combination of the two. It is most important to note that Hume states that “a relation of impressions is requisite to these passions” (T 2.2.1.8).

. For something to be represented, a relation is required—a representation is a representation *of* something; this indicates a relation between the two. The representation needs to resemble or otherwise be connected to the thing being represented. Here I will argue that some process of thought or consideration is requisite for a “relation.” Hume explains relations as such, with the former relation being natural, and the latter being philosophical:

The word *relation* is commonly us'd in two senses considerably different from each other. Either for that quality, by which two ideas are connected together in the imagination, and the one naturally introduces the other... or for that particular circumstance, in which, even upon the arbitrary union of two ideas in the fancy, we may think proper to compare them (T1.1.5.1).

From the language Hume uses here, it is evident that there is some sort of thinking going on in relating one idea to another. With natural relations, it is something that the imagination does automatically; with the philosophical relations, it is something that the mind can willingly do. This characterization of philosophical relations indicates a process of thinking or consideration; in order for me to compare one thing to another, I must consider things about them. The role of consideration in the natural relations is less obvious, because one idea “involuntarily” introduces another (Owen, 80). It seems as if the involuntary nature of the transition between ideas would preclude consideration or thinking. In fact, Hume does use the term imagination in a somewhat loose and inexact manner throughout the *Treatise*, but it seems as if he intends it to be considered as some sort of thinking. He states that “the imagination has the command over all its ideas, and can, join, and mix, and vary them in all the ways possible” (T1.3.7.7). The imagination deals with ideas, recall that ideas are “the faint images of [impressions] in thinking and reasoning” (T 1.1.1.1). It seems as if consideration or thought is necessary when dealing with relations of ideas. In order for one thing to represent another, these things must stand in a relation with one another, and this relation requires some form of consideration whether implicit or explicit.

It follows from all this, that if original impressions are experientially radical, and pre-reflective; they cannot be put into a relation with something it is purported to represent. Since secondary impressions necessarily rely on preceding perceptions (whether through an idea or original impression) it is clear that the impressions cannot represent on their own. Ideas and

secondary impressions are dependent upon pre-reflective experience. Pre-reflective experience cannot have representative content, because this would require some kind of consideration of the content. The representing comes into play through relations, and this occurs after reflection. I am not suggesting that impressions do not have content, they must have experiential content, but the point is that the content of an impression cannot represent. The experiential content is represented by an idea *related* to the impression. So all impressions, including passions, only acquire representative content by having an idea associated with them.

To illustrate my argument, consider the following example. While walking down the street, I am struck and injured by a red car. I have original impressions of the pain, of the red, of the extension and body of the car, and the sounds that are made during the event. These are simple impressions that are copied as simple ideas. According to Hume's system, these simple ideas get joined together by the imagination and become complex ideas. The ideas *represent* the impressions they are derived from. So my idea of the red car is a complex idea that links and represents my impressions of the *red* and the *car*.

After I heal from my injuries, I am walking down a street and I perceive a red car. Again, I have impressions of *red* and *car*, these are again original impressions. These impressions become the complex idea of red car, and I have an idea of pain associated with the idea of red car. Recall that direct passions are considered secondary impressions, and cannot arise without the assistance of original impressions or ideas associated with them. My idea of the red car is associated with the idea of my impression of the pain I experienced when struck by a red car, and I therefore experience fear. In this example, my impression of *red* and *car* do not represent anything, the simple ideas of *red* and *car* represent the concept of 'something that has the

quality of the color red' and 'something that is a car.' These ideas are linked by the one or more principle of association and become the idea of 'red car.' My experience of fear does not represent anything, but the passion has the complex idea that represents "that time I was struck and injured by a red car" annexed to it. This is how this instance of my fear acquires representational content. This example illustrates how impressions lack their own representative content, and acquire content by being attached to an associated idea. The onus of representation belongs to ideas, not to impressions.

This argument may raise the following concern. If the only difference between impressions and ideas is *force*, and ideas clearly represent something, then why suggest that impressions cannot represent? First, recall that impressions are experienced prior to ideas. Second, Hume does not assert that all ideas intrinsically represent (Garrett, 307-308). If ideas do not intrinsically represent, then there is not a problem with saying that impressions do not represent. Since simple ideas are copies of simple impressions, then it makes sense to say that ideas represent without assuming that impressions have to. After all, a copy is a representation of something. This distinction is most clear in regards to original impressions, following that original impressions are pre-reflective; unless we reflect on something, how can we be aware of its content? Since secondary impressions arise from original impressions or ideas, we can reasonably conclude that they are at least associated with intentional content without assuming that they have content of their own. If we recall that the basic difference between impressions and ideas is the difference between "thinking and feeling," then this line of thought becomes clearer (T 1.1.1.1).

Don Garrett's account of secondary impressions presents another challenge to my argument. Don Garrett asserts that at least some impressions of reflection are capable of representing. He claims that:

Moral and aesthetic sentiments (which are like the passions in being impressions of reflection) are also typically associated with ideas having representational content; but these sentiments may, in addition, be regarded as themselves representing, in at least some way, the particular qualities—such as virtue and vice, beauty and deformity—that, on his account, their occurrence allows us to “sense” (Garrett, 303).

Garrett posits that moral sentiments may represent moral qualities in the same manner as an impression of color represents the quality in the object that produces the impression. Garrett's position is untenable if we take two things into account: that an impression of color cannot represent anything, and that Hume describes the “sense” of virtue as something requiring consideration.

First, recall the primacy of original impressions. An impression of a color is an impression of sensation, and does not represent. The impression is an experience of something, the idea that is copied from the impression possesses intentional content. Furthermore, even if impression of sensations *could* represent anything, it is impossible to know what it is a representation of. Without some sort of relation to the object per se, the representation cannot be a representation; Hume asserts that the causes of impressions of sensation are “perfectly inexplicable by human reason” and there is no way to be certain that they actually represent the object they purport to represent (T 1.3.5.2). Garrett's comparison of moral sentiments and impression of color is an inappropriate analogy and does not support his position.

Second, Hume states that “to have a sense of virtue, is nothing but to *feel* a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character” (T 3.1.2.3). Here, Garrett’s position runs into the problem of Hume’s distinction between thinking and feeling. The “contemplation of a character” is some sort of consideration of ideas associated with said character, and the result is an impression of reflection that causes us to feel a certain way. Furthermore, Hume posits that “in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous” (3.1.2.3). So the sense that something is virtuous is another impression of reflection that is augmented by ideas. Garrett’s assertion that moral sentiments can represent qualities of virtue seems to conflate the *idea* of “satisfaction of a particular kind” with the experience of “satisfaction of a particular kind.”

To conclude, my argument that impressions cannot represent does presuppose that some process of consideration is required for a representation to occur; the notion that representation relies on relations bears a considerable amount of weight in my argument. This notion is a plausible one in the context of Hume’s system. Hume’s impressions are incapable of representing or having intentional content without the assistance of corresponding ideas. This is because representation requires some sort of relation between the representation and the represented. The relation cannot occur outside of some sort of consideration, to which ideas are requisite. Original impressions are experientially radical, thus all ideas and secondary impressions rely on them for their existence. Ideas do not inherently represent, but are instead prone to representing because of the nature of their creation; they are copies of correspondent impressions.

At first glance, Hume's conception of ideas and impressions characterize ideas as a mere dilution of impressions. Since ideas can represent, then it would follow that impressions can as well. This is not the case, because impressions do not go through a formation process like that of ideas. Original impressions are primary and "without any introduction make their appearance in the soul," and are the basis for ideas (T 2.1.1.2). Impressions of sensation, according to Hume, spring from inexplicable and inaccessible causes; they may be derived from an object, the human imagination or illusion of the senses (T 1.3.5.2). Regardless of where original impressions come from, Hume's view seems to be that they are the foundation of our ideas. Our ideas are *copies* of our impressions; it is the responsibility of the ideas to represent their correspondent impressions and to accommodate intentional content.

Works Cited

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